

【研究ノート】

Godzilla After the Meltdown: the evolution and mutation of Japan's greatest monster

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Abstract:

Godzilla (1954) was an allegorical film condemning America's role in the testing and use of nuclear weapons. As the *Godzilla* series continued over decades, Japan's relationship with America changed, as did the metaphors and references within the films. In 2014, we now have the first true American addition to the *Godzilla* series. This paper explores some of the ways in which *Godzilla*'s symbolic value has changed through the years, and as the series crossed cultures.

Keywords: *Godzilla*, disaster, film, nuclear energy

“In 1954 we awakened something.”
- Dr. Serizawa, *Godzilla* (2014)

Godzilla was first released in Japanese theatres in 1954, during a time of deep uncertainty for the nation. A mere nine years previously, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been devastated by atomic bombs, bringing an end to the war, and beginning an era in which Japan needed to find a new identity as it began rebuilding its infrastructure, political processes, and social value systems. Japan had endured a foreign occupation, a dismantling of its military, a foreign re-writing of its constitution, and a demotion of its emperor from the status of deity, to that of figurehead. This was the Japan to which Ishiro Honda created and released his now-legendary film. At the time, *Godzilla* was a thoughtful commentary on Japan's then-recent struggles and difficulties, as it attempted to deal with the often destructive inclinations of governments both foreign and domestic, and the new global threat of nuclear weaponry.

Now, sixty years after Honda's *Godzilla*, the newest theatrical release starring Japan's favourite oversized reptilian has hit the screens. This time, the project was directed by Gareth Edwards and produced by Warner Brothers Studios, making this the second American film to bring *Godzilla* to the big screen. In the early 21st century, however, the threat of nuclear

bombs has faded somewhat from public dialogue. Although still a valid concern, nuclear weapons no longer figure prominently in the collective consciousness, or the foremost fears of either Japanese or American audiences. The relationship between Japan and America has also changed significantly as Japan's post-war economy grew larger and more intertwined with the rest of the world. These changes are duly reflected in the newest film as the monster tramples a path across the pacific, drawing on more contemporary audience fears such as nuclear meltdowns, tsunami, hurricanes, and government cover-ups.

Honda's original 1954 film (which is sometimes spelled *Gojira* in order to more closely match the Japanese pronunciation or to differentiate it from the radical American re-edit that was released in 1956) must have been deeply disturbing to the audiences that first encountered it after having their nation destroyed by fire-bombings and A-bombs. Just as Japan had begun to rebuild, and a year after (mostly) regaining independence from the foreign powers that had devastated the country, local film screens were met with the specter of a giant monster tearing down the cities that citizens had just spent the last decade trying to rebuild. The black and white images of wounded civilians, collapsed buildings, and smoking ruins were not the images of science-fiction fantasy. These images recalled the newspaper photographs and newsreel footage of their own very recent past.

World War II provided a very different collective experience for Americans than it did for the Japanese, which helps to explain why *Godzilla* has been consumed and interpreted in such different ways by the two audiences over the past six decades. The late stages of WWII saw daily strikes against all of Japan's major cities, destroying an estimated 40% of the populated areas of the 64 largest cities in the nation (Fagg, 1983). On top of the incendiary-bombing of civilian areas, the psychological impact of being hit with two atomic bombs cannot be underestimated. Although the total number of deaths attributable to the two A-bombs are dwarfed by the number of lives lost to firebombing, this new technology, with its unprecedented scale and lingering issues of radiation disease, created a deep and lasting scar on the collective psyche.

The United States, while deeply involved in the later stages of the war, fought the majority of their battles and lost the largest number of American lives on foreign soil. While the numbers of American lives lost in battle were by no means trivial (over 400,000 in total), virtually all of those deaths were military personnel serving overseas. This sort of war has its own psychological burden on civilians, with family members waiting for the return of soldiers

from their missions, rationing, and other sacrifices on the home front. Nonetheless, the threat of immediate destruction of one's family and home was never as immediate to American civilians as it was for those living in Japanese cities in 1945. When American audiences saw the images of bloodied bodies being pulled out from under collapsed buildings, newsreels and newspaper photos also came to mind. Those newsreels however, were documenting destruction that was happening far away across the oceans. That is a very different vantage point for understanding the *Godzilla* film series.

The difference in audience perspective for a film like *Godzilla* was anticipated by Toho, which is likely part of the reason why the 1956 American release of the film was so heavily re-edited and re-shot. The addition of an American protagonist in the form of actor Raymond Burr as reporter Steve Martin worked on the assumption that American audiences of the 1950s would be unlikely to relate to a film cast entirely with Japanese actors, whether or not they were dubbed with English voices. A scenario in which an American reporter traveled to Japan was also a device to help the audience imagine a reason that they might be in such a faraway place, and hopefully make the Tokyo city scenes seem slightly less foreign. This further allowed the film to appeal directly to a white American audience by opening with a flash-forward in which Martin is laying injured and bloodied under a pile of wreckage. As such, the first image of death and destruction in the film was more likely to remind viewers of newsreels from the bombings of London (the result of German firebombing) than the images of Tokyo or Hiroshima (the result of their own country's military assault), thus creating sympathy for the victims while avoiding associations of guilt.

Other changes to the Americanized 1956 script also point to a concerted effort to mask the social commentary of the 1954 Japanese release. One of these changes, although unlikely to even register for a casual Western audience, has to do with a song that is sung by school children in the original cut. The tune for this song, which is played during one of the more emotional scenes as the camera pans across destruction that has been left in the monster's wake, comes from a Japanese memorial hymn that was used to honour those who were lost to the atomic bombs. The words were changed in the film in order to honour Godzilla's victims, but anyone who knew the song would immediately connect Godzilla's rampage with the American bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.



Figure 1: Raymond Burr talking to Emiko in a scene where we never see both actors' faces at once. Most of the tacked-on scenes in the American re-edit were filmed this way. ©Toho Film Co. Ltd.

Including this song in *Godzilla* was no minor act of rebellion. The main islands of Japan had only been returned to independence two year prior to *Godzilla's* release, and Okinawa was still under Allied control. During the American occupation, all Japanese films were subject to censorship by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). SCAP guidelines prohibited a number of subjects including:

anything infused with militarism, revenge, nationalism, or anti-foreignism; distortion of history; approval of religious or racial discrimination; favoring or approving feudal loyalty or treating human life lightly; direct or indirect approval of suicide; approval of the oppression or degradation of wives; admiration of cruelty or unjust violence; anti-democratic opinion; exploitation of children; and opposition to the Potsdam Declaration or any SCAP order. (Anderson, 1982)

Given that these rules had only expired in 1952 with GHQ's withdrawal from the mainland, featuring a song which might guide the audience to interpret the film in a manner that reflects negatively on America was quite bold. It is also no wonder that the song in question was redacted from the American version. Although it would have been unlikely for an American audience to recognize the tune, such topics were best avoided, especially if one's main motivation was to sell movie tickets.

The framing of narrative in the U.S. version also de-emphasises the American blame for loss of life in the film. The original 1954 cut opens with a scene showing a group of sailors enjoying themselves on the deck of a ship called the *Eiko-maru No. 5* [SS Shining Glory No. 5] as identified by the lifebuoy hanging in the top centre of the frame, although another lifebuoy off to the side is inexplicably marked as *Eiko-maru No. 8*. Suddenly, water off the starboard bow begins to glow and boil before a blast of what appears to be radiation wipes out the ship and all of its crew. For Japanese audiences, this scene was a chilling re-enactment of an event that had occurred just eight months before *Godzilla* started showing in theatres. On March 1st 1954, the *Daigo Fukuryu-maru* [SS Lucky Dragon No. 5] was on a tuna fishing voyage near the Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands when the United States were conducting nuclear tests. Although the boat was well outside America's stated safety zone, the explosion was far larger than the military had expected, causing the crew of the Daigo Fukuryu-maru, as well as the residents of islands in the area, to suffer radiation poisoning from the fallout (Arnold, 2006). The entire crew was hospitalized, and Aikichi Kuboyama, the chief radio operator on board, died from radiation poisoning on September 23, 1954 (Ishi, 2011), just five weeks before *Godzilla's* November 3rd premiere. A Japanese audience would have been acutely aware that this scene was a direct reference to recent events, and blame would most definitely have fallen on the United States and the Atomic Energy Commission.

The radiating and sinking of the Eiko-maru is also featured near the beginning of the Americanized version of *Godzilla*, but it does not appear in the opening scene. Instead, we are first introduced to Raymond Burr's character, a sympathetic American who is positioned within the Japanese cast as a helpful adviser and observer. Once Burr has been established as a benevolent force that has come to both document and help resolve the unfolding crisis, the fate of the Eiko-maru is revealed.

American audiences at the time would undoubtedly have known about the nuclear tests that had gone awry in the Bikini Atoll, and many of them would have understood the reference to a ship of Japanese sailors being radiated. The tests had become a flashpoint for concern over the damage that thermonuclear testing was doing to the earth's population, and the treat of nuclear war inspiring, among other cultural products, Nevil Shute's 1957 novel, *On the Beach*. The stapled-on Western protagonist of the American release allowed references to radiation and atomic blasts in *Godzilla* to be read as a critique of the state of global politics and the general threat of nuclear annihilation, as opposed to a pointed indictment of specific American activities.



Figure 2: the crew of the Eiko-maru No.5 become the first victims of Godzilla.
©Toho Film Co. Ltd.

Of course, *Godzilla* was not the first monster movie to tackle sensitive social or political matters, and one could argue that the *Godzilla* franchise itself started not in Japan, but across the ocean in America nineteen years earlier. Monster movies have long been outlets for screenwriters and directors to broach topics and comment on social issues that are deemed too delicate to tackle head-on. This tradition harkens back to at least 1933 and the release of the original *King Kong*, which Honda has specifically cited as an inspiration for *Godzilla*. In fact, Godzilla's name is a portmanteau of "gorilla" with the Japanese word for "whale," a nod to the film's creative inspiration and an indication that the initial concept for the monster may have been somewhat more mammalian than the lizard king with which we are now familiar.

Critics such as Gerald Perry have surmised that *King Kong* was a cautionary tale in the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his then-nascent New Deal (Perry, 1974). In this interpretation, Denham, the film's protagonist, is seen as a surrogate for Roosevelt and his liberal policies. As Denham plucks Faye Wray's character from the soup lines, he promises her a more prosperous future, only to lay the groundwork for suffering and destruction as the creature that he has unleashed runs out of control and has to be put down by the country's military apparatus. While certain aspects of the film reflect a need to change the status quo (urban scenes of poverty in the opening sequences, for example), the implication seems to be that caution should

be exercised in moving too quickly. It is probably best not to release a monster onto the nation until we are sure that we know how to control it, after all.

While the FDR/New Deal reading of the *Kong Kong* narrative may be legitimate, it is by no means the only sensitive topic being broached within those black and white frames. The issue of race was an extremely delicate topic in early 20th century America. RKO Radio Pictures' early monster masterpiece was released into movie theatres about 70 years after the 14th amendment to the constitution abolished slavery in the United States, and 20 years before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus. Within this social context, *King Kong* has often been read as a work that was trying to come to terms with the horrible stain and continuing legacy that slavery had left on the nation (Rivers, 2012) or as a warning against the communist threat that was supposedly spreading through the black community (Rosen, 1975). As early monster movies were not taken particularly seriously at the times of their releases, they were also given a lot of leeway with the censors in terms of social commentary. Because of this history, monster movies, science fiction and other genres which were often relegated to B-movie status have become part of a tradition which involves the expectation of subversive social commentary as part of their narrative appeal.

This tradition of social commentary was picked up in the series of Godzilla films that followed, regardless of the directors and creative crews in charge of each installment. Over the course of thirty films (28 Japanese entries, and 2 American), Godzilla has repeatedly emerged from his oceanic depths either to protect or destroy Japan. In the earliest films, Godzilla closely followed the metaphor for American nuclear activity and the risk that such activity could end up destroying us all. In these films, Godzilla was a huge, pot-bellied imbecile who possessed awesome power, but was unable to control it. His motivation was never at issue. He destroyed because he was too big, powerful and stupid to do anything else. As I pointed out in an earlier paper on this topic (Hamilton, 2000), this representation coincided with Japanese stereotypes of Americans at the time, and those stereotypes largely remain intact. Godzilla as a character, however, gradually ceased to be an allegory for America, as Japanese audiences gained pride in the international success of the film and claimed the monster as their own. This attitude was solidified in 1962's *King Kong vs Godzilla*. The pride that Japanese audiences had in their native monster was evident in the fact that the end of the film was altered for Japanese theatrical release. Both versions of the film result in a defeat for Godzilla, but the Japanese version features a Godzillian roar just as the credits start to roll, indicating that their hero had not yet been truly vanquished, and would rise to fight again.

For American audiences after the early 60s, Godzilla films earned a certain campy entertainment value due to their relatively small budgets and rubber-suit effects. This impression became amplified as the series continued to use rubber suits and cheap special effects well into the era of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Star Wars* (1977) and other films that demonstrated the new possibilities for special-effects and sophisticated narratives in science fiction entertainment. For Americans, Godzilla has always represented the Otherness of Japan, and as the series aged, it increasingly became shorthand for the quirky flavour of Japanese popular culture that had a cult following in Western countries.

The 1998 American effort at capturing Godzilla's magic for American audiences was a critical failure, largely because a menace on the scale of Godzilla had no psychological resonance for U.S. audiences. Three years before the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center, Americans had no historical experience with a foreign menace that was strong enough to bring down skyscrapers in their largest cities. Devlin's movie was the first official Godzilla film to have access to a huge Hollywood budget and special effects team, and thus the visual spectacle was superb. It revelled in the kind of aesthetics of decimation that Susan Sontag described in her much-reprinted essay "The Imagination of Destruction," but there was no fear living in the hearts of Americans that someone or something could suddenly lay waste to New York City. In the years after 9/11, this reality has changed, and since then we've seen a number of monster/destruction films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008), all of which showed New York City being destroyed, and all with a markedly darker tone than 1998's *Godzilla*. After the twin towers had fallen in New York, disaster movies were no longer simply an absurdity. America now had a historical reference that had the potential to make these films much scarier.

The newest instalment in Godzilla's storyline is once again an American production, and fears that live in the hearts of both American and Japanese audiences have evolved in the sixteen years that have passed since Hollywood last aimed their cameras at the king of monsters. Apart from America suffering the attacks of September 11th, 2001, Japan experienced the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and consequent nuclear meltdown in March, 2011. The loss of lives, homes, and livelihoods, as well as a renewed fear of nuclear destruction are once again fresh in the Japanese collective consciousness. Three years after the disaster, thousands of people still live in temporary shelters as they are unable to return to their homes within the exclusion zone surrounding the nuclear plant. The use of nuclear power, once a non-issue to the majority of Japanese, has emerged as a major electoral issue. With the destruction

of 2011 still affecting the lives of so many, it is little wonder that Toho hasn't produced any Japanese Godzilla films in the three years since the disaster. It was inevitable, though, that events would shape the new American version of the script.

As the opening credits appear for Gareth Edward's 2014's *Godzilla*, we are greeted with a montage of what appears to be archival footage, redacted documents referring to something called "Project Monarch," a map of Bikini Atoll, and a bomb resembling the "Little Boy" that was dropped on Hiroshima, except that it is adorned with a hand painted silhouette of Godzilla, circled in red, and crossed out. This is the set-up for a new conceit in the Godzilla mythology, which is explained later in the film. According to the film's narrative, the bombs that were detonated in 1954 were not nuclear tests at all, but rather an effort to kill Godzilla, who had been discovered in the ocean depths using the new technology of nuclear submarines. The nuclear explosions, however, failed to kill Godzilla. Instead, they awoke another creature that feeds on radiation. This creature, dubbed a Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism (MUTO) in the film, lays dormant for decades and now threatens to destroy the Earth's cities. Dr. Serizawa (a variation on the peace-loving scientist of the same name in the original *Godzilla*) hypothesises that Godzilla wants to restore balance in nature, and therefore proposes that the monsters to be allowed to fight without human interference.

As a narrative framework, this setup is far closer to Honda's original concept than Devlin's *Godzilla* was in 1998. In fact, Devlin's *Godzilla*, with its slim, fast-moving, quick-breeding monsters, deviated so far from Toho's established mythology that the company officially changed the name of the creature in the film to "Zilla" once Sony Entertainment's rights to the franchise expired in 2002, allowing Toho to remove the film from the official Godzilla canon (ZILLA, 2008). However, while Edward's *Godzilla* reaches back into history in homage to Honda's original, it also brings the fears and issues of our times with it.

After the opening montage of images and documents from the 1950s, the backgrounds of the protagonist and his father are established with a sequence that takes place in 1999 in a fictional Japanese town called "Janjira." Ford Brody is a young American boy living in Japan where his parents both work at a nuclear power plant. A series of earthquake-like vibrations has been intensifying, and eventually, the power plant collapses, killing Ford's mother, creating a nuclear exclusion zone around the plant, and driving Ford's father Joe, played by Brian Cranston, to begin his lifelong quest for the true cause of the disaster that has been covered up by the government.



Figure 3: workers run from the collapsing nuclear power plant in Godzilla (2014).
 © Warner Bros.

The reference here to the Fukushima meltdown of 2011 is difficult to miss, and the condemnations of both nuclear power and those companies and governments who control it are pointed. In the film, it turns out that the exclusion zone around the plant is actually radiation-free. The government had maintained the zone so that they could observe the larval MUTO that caused the collapse. It had burrowed into the plant in order to feed off of the radiation. Not only did the government and plant managers invite disaster by building the radioactive monster-magnet in the first place, they also endangered the lives of millions by keeping the creature alive for observation until it finally escaped and started a trail of destruction. For those of us who were living in Japan during the weeks after the meltdown in Fukushima, incompetent or greedy power operators and their cover-ups were painfully familiar. News would arrive daily about how the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) had ignored reports suggesting the construction of better defences against tsunamis, or that they had concealed important information from nearby residents that would have helped them to evacuate earlier or to a safer place.

Bringing the horror of the Fukushima disaster to Godzilla made sense for an American audience, too. For most Americans, Godzilla is closely associated with Japan, so the fears associated with the monster should be rooted in Japan, yet able to reach across the ocean. This is precisely what the Fukushima disaster did. Media coverage of the meltdown was terrifying, with American cable news outlets speculating on wind and ocean currents, and the possibility of radiation reaching American shores. Japan was no longer primarily associated with campy films and pop culture. Japan had become a scarier, more tragic place. Just as American disaster films became darker after 9/11, Godzilla received his darkest treatment in decades in

this recent film.

Not only does Edwards' *Godzilla* parallel a Japanese disaster that caused fear in the American public, the events of March 2011 are literally brought across the Pacific to the mainland United States through the course of the film. As the main action of the film progresses, our now adult protagonist attempts to make his way from Japan back to his wife in the US while Godzilla and the MUTOs follow a similar path. During Ford's stopover in Hawaii, Godzilla emerges from the water for a battle with a MUTO, causing a tsunami that rushes through the streets of Waikiki. Scenes of water rushing into urban areas, bending lampposts and throwing cars recalled the news footage of March 2011 in Ishinomaki or Minami Sanriku, and the devastation that they suffered.

After making it across the water to San Francisco the battle between Godzilla and the MUTOs continues, causing mass evacuations and the inevitable urban destruction that marks the climax of most films in the series. It is at this point in the film that the Tohoku earthquake/tsunami/meltdown of 2011 starts to blend with the disasters of America's recent past. Scenes showing evacuees waiting for help in a domed stadium, recalls the plight of those who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina in 2004. Rescue workers and first responders climbing over the smoking grey wreckage calls to mind images of lower Manhattan in September, 2001. Through the course of the film, the Japanese disaster follows Godzilla first to Hawaii for a tsunami (technically US soil, but still an overseas location to most of the American public), and then to the mainland where it becomes one and the same with their own domestic tragedies.

Although most of the references within Edwards' *Godzilla* will remind us of Honda's original version of the film, in many important ways, it has more in common with the subsequent series of sequels. Honda's film falls neatly into the category that Susan Napier refers to as "secure horror," in which the nation's existence is threatened by an outside force, but contained by the collective (Napier, 1993). In the case of 1954's *Godzilla*, this is accomplished by using Dr. Serizawa's weapon, "the oxygen destroyer." Despite the implicit warnings against nuclear testing and condemnation of the actions of the American government, this resolution seems to imply a lingering faith in the Japanese government and their ability to use weapons for good. Edwards' *Godzilla*, on the other hand, finds resolution in allowing nature to take its course. Instead of dropping a weapon into the harbour to kill the monsters, the beasts are permitted to fight it out until natural order is restored. In fact, every time the government or military does try to intervene, they inadvertently make the monsters stronger. This is a trope that is often

seen in the Godzilla vs (add monster here) films that filled out the series in the late 1960s. This characterization of Godzilla (or other kaiju, like Mothra) as representing the purity of nature against the corruption of science has returned in Edwards' version.

As a window into the way American audiences view Japan, the new Godzilla offers few surprises. The meltdown in Fukushima and the incompetence and greed that allowed it to happen are likely to colour the world's view of Japan for years to come. References to Hiroshima and the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll seem to be more nostalgic than cautionary, establishing the American film as legitimate within Toho's established mythology. Once the backstories have been established, it is nuclear power generation and its ability to nourish monsters that is set up as the spectre that could bring our world to an end. It will be interesting to see what becomes of the Godzilla mythos once Toho returns with another Japanese entry in the series. After the critical failure of Zilla in 1998, Toho were quick to follow up with a genuine Japanese film in the form of Godzilla 2000 (1999) and to disown the American creature as soon as they legally could. Edwards' film is unlikely to meet that fate, as it has remained extremely faithful to the films that preceded it. He has also tapped into an issue that has once again become important, and frightening, to the Japanese public.

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